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Carl Knight and Zofia Stemplowska, eds.

Responsibility and Distributive Justice.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.

320 pages

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Responsibility and Distributive Justice is a collection of 13 new, high-quality essays written by some of the most well-known philosophers working on responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism (RSE) or, more generally, in the field of distributive justice. It will be of particular interest to those who already have a good understanding of the relevance of responsibility to distributive justice, and are keen to keep up to date with the debate or are interested in responsibility's relevance to a particular topic, e.g., health care policy.

Richard J. Arneson's essay, which opens the collection, is the only contribution that would be particularly useful to those new to the field of RSE, as it helps to provide an overview of some of the most significant distinctions. Arneson breaks luck egalitarianism (as RSE is often called) down into the components of 'luckism' and 'egalitarianism', highlighting different aspects of each of these components—such as whether we require equality, priority to the worst off, or sufficiency—and he briefly sketches some criticisms of RSE and potential rebuttals.

Marc Fleurbaey highlights two sets of distinctions that he believes are significant but neglected in the RSE literature. He claims we should distinguish first between adopting a liberal or utilitarian interpretation of responsibility, and second between focusing on compensation or reward. The possible combinations of these choices result in four different approaches to equal opportunities which, Fleurbaey claims, are particularly important to distinguish from one another, as there are considerable differences in the consequences of adopting either a liberal or an utilitarian approach.

Stemplowska considers three different versions of RSE. She argues that in its most convincing form, where it is based on respect for equal moral status, RSE can be reconciled with social equality. While social egalitarianism is presented as an alternative to RSE and one that is claimed by its advocates to represent 'genuine' egalitarianism, Stemplowska finds the supposed conflict between these views to be exaggerated: social equality, she claims, should be understood as conditional upon respect for equal moral status.

Advocates of social equality have raised the specific concern that RSE may lead us to abandon those who make imprudent choices. Avner de-Shalit and Jonathan Wolff's contribution argues in favor of a responsibility-sensitive principle of weak asymmetry, which may avoid or reduce the problem of abandonment by considering the relevance of responsibility disproportionately depending on whether the choices individuals make are good or bad. They argue that bad choices should be penalized to a lesser extent than good choices should be rewarded.

Another major criticism of RSE, which Stemplowska highlights in her essay, is that it is often accused of being irrelevant to policy. Shlomi Segall and Norman Daniels demonstrate how responsibility can be applied to health, and, in the case of Daniels, directly to health care policy. Segall argues in favor of a luck prioritarian principle applied to opportunities for health, which he aims to show is superior to applying a Rawlsian principle of fair equality of opportunity. In contrast, Daniels defends a Rawlsian approach over luck egalitarianism, arguing that our social responsibility to promote health should be prioritized over individual responsibility. He explores the application of each of these approaches to some recent attempts to incorporate individual responsibility for health into health insurance packages in the US and Germany.

Like Daniels, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen is critical of RSE. Lippert-Rasmussen highlights a number of ambiguities in how luck egalitarianism is formulated with regards to whether it applies to individuals or groups. Once we are clearer about individual vs. collective avoidability and unavoidability, he argues, we will find that responsibility is actually of less significance to justice than many believe.

The emphasis on individual responsibility also concerns Susan Hurley, who criticizes the notion of rational agency usually underlying responsibility in traditional liberalism. Hurley argues that this notion of rational agency is called into question by empirical research in the cognitive sciences. She claims that responsibility is not private but should be understood according to a public ecology that recognizes the social, cultural and political environment that makes responsibility possible.

David Miller investigates whether we have a duty to ‘take up the slack’ where there is collective responsibility for averting a harm and some of the agents who share this responsibility do not comply. He argues that justice generally requires agents to contribute only their fair share (no more or less), but that in exceptional circumstances, they might be permitted to do less than their fair share or required to do more, i.e., to take up the slack.

Desert and its relationship to justice and egalitarianism are what concern Larry Temkin and Carl Knight. Temkin works through an analysis of different conceptions of justice and fairness to defend ‘equality as comparative fairness’, arguing that egalitarians are not concerned with luck per se but with how people fare relative to each other in terms, primarily, of desert. Knight argues that desert-based conceptions of justice match our intuitions about justice better than responsibility-sensitive notions of justice.

Matt Matravers contradicts the commonly accepted claim that the Rawlsian approach to distributive justice should not be applied to retributive justice. Matravers suggests that both of these forms of justice should start with a commitment to equal moral worth which does not translate people’s natural assets, such as a lack of intelligence or a predisposition to aggression, into unequal starting points.

Peter Vallentyne’s contribution focuses on how the imaginary outcomes of false beliefs (outcomes foreseen by the agent that are not real) could affect broad agent

responsibility. He speculatively suggests that these outcomes could eliminate or reduce, but should not enhance, an agent's responsibility for the prudential value of outcomes.

While the individual papers tend to be of excellent quality and I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the subject, as a collection, the book prompts two related critical comments. The first and seemingly more trivial point is that I would have liked the editors to categorize and structure the papers thematically. Few scholars read collections of essays from cover to cover—reviewers would probably be the primary exception here!—and I am assuming that most readers will want to dip in and out of it, concentrating on the particular topics with which they are most concerned. By simply presenting the essays in what seems to be a primarily unsorted list of individual essays—I did not find the one-paragraph outline in the introduction particularly helpful on this point—the volume may be difficult to use in precisely the way I think readers would want to use it.

In considering, however, how the editors could have structured the book thematically, I realize how difficult this would be, and this raises a potentially more significant criticism. The very loose connections I have drawn here between this volume's essays probably provide a clue as to the problem. The essays fall into two broad categories: those that deal directly with RSE (i.e., luck egalitarianism and its various forms), and those that do not. The essays that are not really about RSE do not fall into a neat category or even various neat categories but are extremely varied. Some seem to fit a theme entirely of their own—Matt Matravers and Peter Vallentyne's essays would be examples. The problem is thus not simply that the themes have remained unidentified, but rather that the volume may lack coherent themes. I believe it might have been improved had the themes that do exist (whatever they are) been better highlighted in the introduction, and if additional papers had been found or commissioned which could help to fill out the more idiosyncratic topics.

There is, however, also a positive side to this criticism. The editors have done an excellent job of devising a volume that is not *merely* about RSE. Much of what is written about responsibility and distributive justice is about luck egalitarianism—whether for or against. For precisely this reason, other kinds of essays that have been written on responsibility and justice are more likely to be innovative and to reach out in varying, tentative directions. The editors have made progress in highlighting that there is much more to say about responsibility and distributive justice than is given simply in discussion of RSE, even if this has simultaneously made many of the essays in the volume particularly difficult to categorize.

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